2005 MAASA Presidential Symposium

Introduction to Presidential Symposium

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"The arts," on the one hand, appear to be a subject superficially less political than many highly charged topics that form the core of so many American studies debates today. The arts carry the residue of a lengthy history that holds Art as the unquestioned apex of civilization, the artist as a gifted individual whose vision of American society offers special insight, and the historical relationship between painting and literature (in particular) a distinctive tradition of American studies. On the other hand, the arts have always been political both in discrete examples that comment directly on social conditions (including issues related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nation) and in the very definitions and methods of interpreting the arts in historical contexts.

So, it was to the subject of "the arts" politically understood that I turned when, as president of the Mid-America American Studies Association, I prepared to deliver a "presidential address" on a topic of substance and provocation to the field at large. I turned not only to the domain in which I have worked in American studies throughout my professional career but to a foregrounded domain in American studies scholarship since American studies' inception. The arts in American studies were championed in such classics as Henry Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land*, expansively celebrated in the 1960s to include all of popular culture, studied repeatedly throughout the latter half of the twentieth century as

0026-3079/2006/4702-067$5.00/0 American Studies, 47:2 (Summer 2006): 67-69

the locus for cultural critique, and then promoted as the repository for identity politics in the 1990s.

Across this expanse of time, "the arts" as objects of study have expanded to include not only time-honored arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, and music but also film and television, performance in dance, theater, and multimedia formats, and photography. The arts also now are understood to encompass a wide range of vernacular, folk, and industrial mass cultural expression, where "high" and "low" only carry distinctions in historical context but not in our consideration or evaluation of the object's value for study.

But, how has American studies adapted to this "moving target?" In a field where methodological debates, self-reflection, and auto-critique are the only sure constants of scholarly inquiry, what have we learned from the last few decades of methodological debate for reshaping the value of the arts broadly and interdisciplinarily? Questions of the "artist's" and "beholder's" subjectivities have been foregrounded as have the historical and geographic contexts for comparative evaluations. The rise and domination of cultural studies emphasize the ways in which the arts, particularly literature and popular culture, may indeed provide the focal lens for understanding modern American society so long as concerns regarding identity politics of producers and consumers get worked out and so long as one literally negotiates where "modern American society" resides in relationship to the United States, the hemisphere of the Americas, and the world-at-large. But what about the ontologies of the objects studied? What about the ways in which our discourses about the objects shape our conclusions?

Frustrated with what appeared to me to be a blind spot in current methodological debates, I set out in two ways to reconsider how the arts in American studies might reshape our larger concerns. Initially, I delivered an address on the role of movies in American studies scholarship at the 2004 Mid-America American Studies conference in Lawrence, Kansas [an earlier version of what is presented here]. I argued that in general scholars have over-valued critical studies of representational politics, implicitly establishing immanent meanings to texts, setting up the arts as ahistorical, and flattening their social registration and dynamism within historical contexts. These scholars, I argued, tell us more about the value of past artistic production for today's audiences than about historical sociological impact. Through individual case studies, I argued for methodologically yoking "text and context."

After the relief of venting my frustrations about a history of scholarship that has resulted from cross-disciplinary conversation between film studies and American studies, I broadened my approach. The "conversation" needed many more participants with wider interdisciplinary reaches in the humanities and fine arts. As a consequence, I organized "The Arts in American Studies Scholarship," a two-day symposium sponsored by the Department of American Studies at the University of Iowa in February 2005. Professors Miles Orvell (Temple University), Angela Miller (Washington University), Jane Desmond (University of Iowa), and I presented overviews assessing the roles of different

arts in American studies scholarship. Professors Tom Doherty (Brandeis University), John Raeburn (University of Iowa), and Bruce McConachie (University of Pittsburgh) responded. Tom Doherty and Bruce McConachie also offered their own research as exemplaries. Audience participants included faculty and graduate students from different disciplines, different schools.

The two essays here were linchpin presentations at the symposium—assessments of scholarly approaches regarding the roles of "the arts" and the production and consumption of "the arts" as historically transformative of societies' understandings of American-ness. The intellectual success of the symposium is well represented in these two essays. The limitations of the symposium are equally well represented in these two essays insofar as the discussions seemed able only to consider one art form at a time. Perhaps, this was a limitation of the speakers or my organizational structure and principles. Perhaps, more dauntingly, it is a limitation of our intellectual past, even one framed by interdisciplinary hallmarks in American studies. Yet, the two essays presented here offer some important glimpses into potentially new conversations: they both speak to the centrality of understanding "the power of the photographic image" for American studies scholarship past, present, and future; they both demonstrate that good scholarship addresses the opaqueness of these objects (Orvell calls it their "baffling complexity") rather than claim their transparency as cultural documents; they both make arguments that visual culture is not so much about art as about "connecting the dots" between the visual, the historical, and the cultural.